

PALEOLOGIC THINKING

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Clinical Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Cognitive Development

1. Core Definition

Paleologic Thinking refers to a distinct mode of cognition characterized by concrete, primitive, and often illogical thought procedures. Derived from the Greek roots *palaios* (ancient or old) and *logos* (reason or discourse), the term signifies a form of archaic thinking. This mode is marked by thought processes that resemble dream-like states, often disregarding the rules of formal logic and reality constraints, prioritizing associative links and idiosyncratic connections over verifiable evidence. It is fundamentally associated with the primary process thinking described in psychoanalytic theory, operating outside the reality principle and reflecting a developmental or regressive state.

In its classical definition, paleologic thought utilizes faulty premises, especially the principle of the "identity of predicates," a concept crucial to understanding its structure. Unlike formal logic (secondary process thinking) which demands the identity of subjects (e.g., $A=B$), paleologic thought argues that if two things share a property or characteristic (a predicate), they are fundamentally the same thing. For example, if "Person A is speaking of water" and "Person B is also speaking of water," paleologic thinking might illogically conclude that Person A and Person B share an essential, deeper identity or belong to the same category, regardless of context. This mechanism drives many of the peculiar associations, overinclusions, and fragmented ideas observed in certain psychological states.

2. Theoretical Origins: Eugen Bleuler and Psychoanalytic Context

The concept of paleologic thinking was first introduced and detailed by the pioneering Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (1857-1939). Bleuler coined the term in the context of his comprehensive studies of the condition he named *schizophrenia*. He observed that the profound cognitive disturbances inherent in this disorder involved a regression to earlier, more primitive modes of thought. Bleuler posited that paleologic thinking was central to schizophrenic thought disorder, explaining the bizarre symbolism, illogical connections, and neologisms characteristic of the condition.

Bleuler distinguished paleologic thinking from normal adult reasoning, viewing it as a manifestation of the severe breakdown of the boundaries between inner, subjective reality and outer, objective reality. He connected it directly to Freud's primary process, noting that while healthy adults confine such illogical, associative thinking to the unconscious (dreams, fantasies), in schizophrenia, this primary process thinking contaminates and dominates conscious thought, leading to impaired reality testing, profound disorganization, and the formation of delusions based on internal, private

logic.

3. Key Characteristics and Manifestations

Paleologic thought exhibits several identifiable characteristics that differentiate it from secondary process, or realistic, thinking. These characteristics stem from an overwhelming reliance on affect and association rather than empirical scrutiny or syntactic structure, leading to a thought process that is both rigid and illogical simultaneously.

Identity of Predicates: This is the hallmark feature, where similarity in attributes (predicates) is erroneously generalized into an assumption of identity between two distinct subjects. This violation of Aristotelian logic is responsible for associative thinking that appears grossly irrational.

Overinclusion: The inability to maintain conceptual boundaries, resulting in the incorporation of irrelevant or overly broad categories when defining a concept. The boundaries of thought are too permeable, leading to vague, diffuse, and ultimately meaningless definitions.

Concreteness and Lack of Abstraction: Thinking remains strictly tied to specific, literal instances rather than moving toward abstract, conceptual categories or metaphorical understanding. Symbols are often literalized, and metaphors are interpreted as factual statements, contributing to communication difficulties and misinterpretations of reality.

Egocentricity: The individual struggles to adopt perspectives external to their own immediate subjective experience. This lack of self-object differentiation contributes to the merging of internal wishes, fears, or thoughts with external, objective events.

Non-Linear and Dream-like Procedures: Thought processes often mimic the mechanisms of dream work, such as displacement, condensation (fusing multiple ideas into one), and the absence of negation, time, and spatial constraints, giving the thought sequence a fragmented, non-sequential quality.

4. Developmental Analogues and Non-Pathological Occurrence

While Bleuler emphasized the pathological nature of paleologic thinking, developmental psychologists, particularly those influenced by Piaget, recognized analogous thought structures in the typical cognitive progression of children. Although distinct from the persistent and pervasive thought disorder seen in psychosis, the thinking of young children--specifically those in the pre-operational stage described by Jean Piaget--shares several fundamental features with paleologic thought.

In pre-operational children, thinking is typically marked by high levels of centration (focusing on only one aspect of a problem), an inability to perform mental operations like reversibility, reliance

on phenomenalist causality (magical thinking), and animism (attributing life to inanimate objects). For instance, a young child might believe that the moon follows them because their subjective experience of movement is central to their reality construction. This developmental form of thinking is considered normal, providing the necessary cognitive scaffolding from which higher-order, logical (neologic) thinking eventually emerges through maturation and social interaction. The concept highlights that paleologic thought is not inherently abnormal, but rather a primitive cognitive mechanism that becomes problematic only when it fails to be integrated or superseded by secondary process thinking in adulthood.

5. Significance in Clinical Assessment

The recognition of paleologic thinking holds significant diagnostic and prognostic value, particularly within the psychodynamic and clinical psychiatric traditions. Its presence, especially when pervasive and resistant to rational correction, is a strong indicator of formal thought disorder. Clinicians often assess for the presence of these thought patterns through the rigorous examination of speech coherence, the presence of loose associations, tangentiality, and the idiosyncratic use of symbolism and language (neologisms).

Furthermore, understanding paleologic processes is crucial for effective therapeutic intervention. When therapy involves individuals whose cognitive structure relies heavily on paleologic associations, the standard techniques relying solely on rational insight may prove ineffective. Therapies targeting thought disorder must first recognize the fundamental structural difference in how the patient constructs reality. Interventions often aim to help the individual establish clearer boundaries between their internal associative world and external, consensually validated reality, gradually reinforcing secondary process thinking while acknowledging the subjective power of the paleologic associations.

6. Debates and Contemporary Views

In contemporary research, particularly within cognitive neuroscience, the concept of paleologic thinking is less frequently used as a primary diagnostic category. Modern approaches tend to decompose the phenomena into specific, measurable cognitive deficits, such as working memory impairment, attentional filtering failures, language processing deficiencies, or deficits in executive function. These models provide more precise, empirically verifiable mechanisms (e.g., reduced capacity for inhibitory control) to explain the disordered thought patterns previously grouped under the umbrella of paleologic thinking.

Despite this shift toward neurocognitive specificity, the term retains vital conceptual relevance in psychodynamic and clinical settings. It serves as a valuable conceptual shorthand, describing the qualitative nature of thought processes rooted in primary processing and regression. The term

continues to be used to differentiate the primitive, highly personalized thought structures observed in psychosis from the rational, reality-bound structures of normal cognition, maintaining its utility as a descriptive tool for understanding the continuum between archaic and mature mental operations.

Further Reading

Bleuler, Eugen. Definition and influence on psychiatry.

Formal Thought Disorder and its relationship to paleologic processes.

Primary Process and Secondary Process Thinking in Psychoanalytic Theory.

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